

Transcription: Joe Vaughn

Today is Friday, October 9th, 2009.

Joe Vaughn: October 9th? My birthday is October 12th.

Sir, well happy birthday in advance. But today is October 9th, 2009, and I'm interviewing Mr. Joe Vaughn, and my name is James Crabtree. And this interview is taking place at the William Courtney Veterans Home in Temple, Texas, and it's in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you for taking the time to talk to me today.

Joe Vaughn: Anytime.

Yes sir. Usually one of the first questions I always ask is just tell us a little bit about what your life was like before you went in the military, where you were born or what your childhood was like, or that sort of thing.

Joe Vaughn: Well, I was born in the little state of Texas in Palestine, Texas.

Palestine, yes sir, East Texas.

Joe Vaughn: And I think I was raised mostly in Houston. I think my dad and my mother moved to Houston when I was pretty small. I've lived there all of my life except when I went in the military. I went in the military in '49, and I stayed there for 24 years. I've forgotten what year I retired now. But 24 years after October 29.

What made you want to go in the Army?

Joe Vaughn: Well, I'll just spit it out to you blank. Black and white peoples had conflicts all their life, but back in my days which is way before your days, because I got a daughter older than you, and I just couldn't find nothing decent job, so I just thought I'd go in the Army. Guys were telling me, man, you're crazy to go in the Army. Ain't rainin' nothing out there, well anyway, I decided I'd join the Army. I went in there and that was January of '49.

Where did they send you for boot camp?

Joe Vaughn: Fort Riley, Kansas, that's where I went and took my boot camp.

What was that like? Was that the first time you'd been away from Houston?

Joe Vaughn: Yes, and to tell you the truth, I'm glad you asked that. I think so. I don't remember going nowhere. That was the first time I'd been out of Texas, because I was born in Palestine. To tell you the truth that probably was the first time I'd been out of Houston.

What was boot camp like for you?

Joe Vaughn: It was pretty much like football training. The only thing about it was we got up early in the morning, and when you go to football, you in the afternoon or mostly in the evening.

But boot camp, well what was exciting about it to me was I had been in Texas all my life, and I went to Fort Riley, Kansas to take my boot camp, and I had never been out in the snow before. And in Kansas, I tell you in boot camp wasn't nothing but snow and ice. But it was exciting to me because I used to do a lot of hunting with my brother, and we didn't have nothing but dogs. Everywhere we went was on foot, and going through snow and ice in boot camp was nothing new and different to me. It's just that I had proper clothing. I was in the Army going through that training. When I was a kid, you wouldn't believe it but I'd been hunting in the snow barefooted.

That's pretty bad, yeah.

Joe Vaughn: We just didn't have nothing else, and we didn't have no guns. We had dogs, but you get out there and run with them dogs, you don't feel nothing, after you get used to it maybe. But it didn't bother us a bit. And I'm an asthmatic, you know what I mean? I'd be out there in that cold ice and snow, but I never had the asthma until I get back home and take a bath and go outside.

So all through boot camp then, your asthma didn't bother you either?

Joe Vaughn: It didn't bother me a bit. Well one thing about it, I was getting three meals a day. Black people didn't have much and three meals a day, shoot, I couldn't get sick.

What was that like because I know the military was desegregated in 1947 and you were in boot camp just two years after that, was that strange? I guess you didn't know any different. You didn't know what segregated military had been like, but you had been raised in a segregated city. When you were in boot camp then you were in there with white and black, right? Was that strange for you? Was that the first time in your life you had been in a desegregated place?

Joe Vaughn: Well, not really, I guess, well in a segregated place where they had rooms, but I've been, lived around white and black people all over Houston. But that was the first time that I had been like all in one section.

It had to have been the first time that you were able to sit and eat with white people, right?

Joe Vaughn: Well, live together. I had sittin' in some places for a few days or hours or something like that, but that's the first time I had ever lived with white people, yes. But no, because when I went in the military it was segregated in the military. White soldiers on one side of the post and the black soldiers was over here.

Really, because I thought they desegregated the military in '47, but if you're saying when you were in it was still desegregated?

Joe Vaughn: Well, when I was, yeah, because I was in there, well, even after that when I went to Japan we were still segregated because we'd, I was in a black unit in Japan, a white unit later on I got in a white unit, but I don't remember when it was desegregated. I'd been in there quite a while before they desegregated the Army.

When you entered the Army did you ever think you were going to make a career out of it and retire as a career out of the Army?

Joe Vaughn: No, I never did. I didn't go in there for that. I guess I was running away when I went and joined the Army, and I never thought I'd like it enough to stay, but I got in there, I liked it. The thing about it was the Korea War started and I went overseas and that's the first time I'd been away from home. Well, see when I first went into the Army, the Army was segregated. OK, when I got over there in Korea and we were all in one group, and it was be together or be apart, and you got to learn how to live together, and we just, well me myself, I used to play with white kids when I was small, but they was on the other side of the road. We always got along fine with them and I never had no problem, so I didn't think nothing about it when I was in the Army. But when I went into the Army, it was segregated because I took boot camp training with all black soldiers.

OK, so I thought by '49 it would have been desegregated, but –

Joe Vaughn: No, it was a long time before it was desegregated. Because I was in Japan and one side of the post was black and the other side was white. I'd been in there quite a while before they desegregated.

What was Korea like when you got there?

Joe Vaughn: Cold. It was cold but it was exciting to me because it was new. I didn't know nothing but Texas. You can go miles in Texas and you still ain't been nowhere.

Yeah, that's true.

Joe Vaughn: But being outside of Texas and going through California and all and different countries, boy, I tell you it was exciting. I guess that's one of the reasons why I stayed in the Army because I have always, well I guess you might say I have never been prejudiced. I've always like light-skinned women. I never did like no real dark-skinned woman, and when I got in there and could go with a woman anywhere I want anytime, that was exciting to me. And they send me to, yeah, the Korean War broke out, and when the Korean War broke out they sent me to Korea. But I got in Japan. You have to go through Japan, get all your field and gear and equipment. They give you all that in Japan and then they take you to the airport and put you on a plane, and they fly you directly to Korea. Well, I got there and I'm an asthmatic -

Yeah, you mentioned about asthma, that's right.

Joe Vaughn: Well I got to Japan and it was in the winter time, snow and ice, and I never could take a bath and go outside, not right away. Usually I take a bath at night before I go to bed, and I would never have the asthma. I hadn't had asthma for quite a while, oh, quite a few years. But over there, you got to go outside whether you want to or not. You're in the Army and they tell you to do this and that, but the thing about it was they didn't have a shower in the room. You had to go across the field out somewhere to take a shower. This was in Japan. And I got the asthma attack, and in Japan it's cold and all that anyway, and I took a hot bath, not only one time, I did this several times, and I got an asthma attack. And they said well we can't send you to Korea right now, and so they took me off Korea and stationed me there in Japan. But that was right after World War II, wasn't no men, just mostly women, and that was exciting to me, you know. I went downtown in Japan, boy, and I tell you, two women on each side of you and boy, you women's all right. I ain't never leaving this place. So anyway, they stationed me in Japan instead of sending me to Korea. I remember the guys just like you and I talking and they said well what we gonna do with him now? We can't send him to Korea. He's got this asthma. One

of the guys said well, he's here in Japan, let's just keep him here, and that's what they did, they kept me there in Japan. This was right after World War II, and man, at my age there, and I was in my early 20's, they didn't have no men over there. All of them had been killed in World War II. And I'd go out on the town and meet a woman and here I am sleeping by myself and two or three women on each side, this is exciting to me.

So how long did you end up spending in Japan total?

Joe Vaughn: Well, what happened was you have to go through Japan when you go into Korea and get all your equipment, and then they put you on the plane the next day. Well, OK, I'd taken a hot bath and going out in that cold, icy weather out there in Japan, I had an asthma attack. I hadn't had asthma for years. But I had an asthma attack and they took me up to see the doctor.

So they kept you in Japan because of the asthma. Did you ever end up going to Korea?

Joe Vaughn: Yeah, I did later on, but I wanted to go. I didn't tell them I had the asthma.

What was your specialty? Were you an Infantryman?

Joe Vaughn: No, I was a medic.

So you were a medic in Korea. Were you assigned to an infantry unit or an artillery unit?

Joe Vaughn: I didn't go to Korea until 10 years later.

OK, so you were there after the war, OK.

Joe Vaughn: But they stationed me, just like you and I talking, the guy said what we gonna do with him now? We can't send him to Korea. He's got asthma. And he said well, we need people in Japan. Let's keep him here in Japan. And that's what they did, they stationed me there in Japan.

How did you come to be a medic? Did you want to be a medic when you were in boot camp?

Joe Vaughn: No, after we finished boot camp, just like you and I talking, we was a bunch of guys sitting in the building over there, there was about 8 or 10 of us and they hadn't sent us nowhere yet. We were talking and so they came in there and said, well I don't remember, I wasn't the only one, but several of say yup, said Vaughn, I said yea? He said we'll you're going to medical school in San Antonio. Boy, I was excited because see, I was from Houston, and I know I can go home on weekends. I was a triple soldier then. I was excited, and so they sent, I was up in Fort Riley, Kansas. That's where I took my boot camp. And boy, I had never been in snow and ice before because I'd been in Texas all my life. And Kansas City, brother, it's snow and ice there all the time, winter time. I was sitting there waiting, it was oh about 8 or 10 of us who had not yet been assigned anywhere, and most of the guys left right after Kansas, but I don't know why -

So you were randomly picked to go to medical school and be a medic.

Joe Vaughn: They come down after boot camp and said, called my name and they said you're going to medical school. I said medical? And personally going through my mind I'm going to

be a doctor. So you're going to medical school in Fort Sam Houston, Texas. Boy, I was excited then because my home was Houston. Well I could go home every week.

What was medical school like? You had to learn how to do first aid and run an IV. Was that difficult?

Joe Vaughn: It wasn't difficult if you knew how to do it, but seemed, I didn't think on them terms of just giving IV's and stuff like that. I thought being a doctor? But when I got there it was fun because it was fun going through medical school because you did all kind of medical stuff, learning how to do first aid and put different types of bandages on and telling you what to do when somebody gets some kind of, some interesting thing like that. I felt I was doing something important.

Oh absolutely, yeah.

Joe Vaughn: I must've did good. I went through there with flying colors and came out of there in, when I finished medical school, they had what I think it about 8 or 10 of us they hadn't assigned nowhere yet, so they told me – medical school I had finished that and they said Vaughn, we're gonna send you to Japan. No, they said you're going to Korea.

Then you got stuck in Japan because of your asthma.

Joe Vaughn: And being in Japan, that was not long after World War II. And see all the men in my age there, I was in my early 20's, and you couldn't see a man over 10 or 12 years old. Man, everywhere I go, I went to bed at night between three or four women, five women sometime. I got so excited over there I said I'm staying here.

Ultimately I guess you were assigned away from Japan. Where else did you serve besides Japan?

Joe Vaughn: Later on I served in Korea, Vietnam.

When were you in Vietnam?

Joe Vaughn: I was in Vietnam not long after the beginning of the war. Well in fact I was there when it started. And the Korean War, I was there when it started and ended. I went to Korea first. Then the Vietnam War started.

Were you a medic in Vietnam with any units out in the field and that sort of thing?

Joe Vaughn: Yes.

What was that like for you?

Joe Vaughn: Well it wasn't so much people getting hurt. It's people trying to find excuses to get out of the war. They always come just like you and I sitting here, now they come, we have a sick all every morning, and they always got some kind of aches and pains that don't even exist, but you have to listen to them. Most of the time they had these aspirins called APC. You know what that is? It ain't nothing but an aspirin, but it's larger than an aspirin and so you won't think it's just an aspirin, it's got something else in it, they give you that but it ain't nothing but a big

aspirin. I didn't know it then, but I know it now. Every time somebody comes to us at the aid station there, they come to us sick and aching with pain, give them one of them APC boy, and they think they got some medicine. You can tell there ain't nothing wrong with them.

Did you go out to the field much? Was there a unit out in the field in Vietnam?

Joe Vaughn: No, I didn't go out in the field much often because I had asthma. I had an asthma attack. Where was I? I was on my way to Korea and so I had that asthma and they kept me in Japan.

When you went to boot camp when you left Houston, did your recruiter or anyone ever ask you if you had asthma?

Joe Vaughn: No, because it's something until it bothers you, you don't know, nobody knows about it.

I know when I went to basic training, that was one of the things they would look for in the medical exam, and if you had it, they wouldn't let you go.

Joe Vaughn: I never told nobody until I had an attack and at that time, I hadn't had an attack for years, and I guess being in the snow and ice which was something I was never used to in Japan. The station where I forgot what you call it now, but you go through that station and then they send you to Japan. Well I had an asthma attack while I was there, and they said well we can't send him to Korea. They were wondering what to do and one guy said well he's here, and we are here in Japan, and we need people here because we can send most of them to Korea and said we could keep him here. They said he's got a medical, he went to medical school, and said why not keep him in Japan. So they put me in the hospital, Osaka Army Hospital in Osaka, Japan, and that's where my career I guess you might say started because after being there for two years, I enjoyed, I liked it there and they sent me back to the United States. I was in Korea then and they sent me back to the United States and I reenlisted. I said shoot, I like Japan, I'm gonna reenlist to go back there. And I reenlisted. At that time they was pretty good about giving you assignments what you ask for. I reenlisted and went back to Japan and I was there for three years.

When you finally retired were you at Fort Hood?

Joe Vaughn: Yes.

And then you just kind of stayed in the Fort Hood/Temple area after you retired?

Joe Vaughn: Well, I had been in Killeen for quite a few years and I had already bought a home, but I went back and forth overseas several times. Then too, I had my house, and I don't know why I'm here in Killeen. I guess God wanted me here. Because I sold that house three different times when I went overseas somewhere, and I'd always get letters. The government bought me the house, on government loan, and they told me you have to make payments on that house or you're gonna lose it. So what I did, I don't know, I remember somebody turned me over to a real estate dealer. So I turned the house over to a real estate dealer and I had nothing to do with that house for years, but he would make the payments on the house, he'd put the money, the balance of money in the bank for me, man, I had something like \$12,000 or \$14,000 in the bank and didn't even know it.

He bought it from you?

Joe Vaughn: No, the real estate, he took over my house and he'd rent it out.

Oh he rented it out, OK.

Joe Vaughn: Yeah, and well, this was back in the early days, so I think my house note was something like \$80 or \$90 a month or something like that, and the house rented for \$200 or \$300. He'd make the house payment and put the rest in the bank for me. Boy man, I had something like \$14,000 or \$15,000 in the bank. I say it like it is. Like we'd say, I'm nigger rich now. I guess after that, just everything pretty much came easy for me. I never had no problem.

You mentioned earlier you had a daughter. Were you married when you were in the Army?

Joe Vaughn: Well they sent me to Japan and I met this girl over there and I got her pregnant, and I of course guys was doing it all the time, getting them girls pregnant and leaving their kids over there. Japan was right after the war and they were a poor country, and I seen them girls struggling trying to take care of them babies and them guys gonna send them money or send for them and stuff, and then once they leave they don't do nothing. The poor girls, I've seen them struggle over there. And I didn't want that to happen to my kid, so I reenlisted and I stayed over there until I got married. Then I brought my family back with me.

That's great.

Joe Vaughn: Yeah. Of course after that we had three or four other kids, but that's what got me started in the Army. And then too after I'd been in the Army and I was stationed up in California and she wanted to go back to Japan, see my wife is Japanese, and she wanted to go back to Japan and see her family, and I told her because I was in the medical corps and it usually wasn't hard to get an assignment wherever you wanted because they got medical people everywhere. So I reenlisted to go back to Japan and I went over there, and after that I got hooked in the Army.

That's great. When did you come back to Texas?

Joe Vaughn: Oh, I went overseas and back three or four different times and came back. First time I went over there to Japan, I came back, I got stationed in California, and I had had so much fun in Japan, I said I'm gonna reenlist and go back. That's why I went back to have some more fun. That was right after World War II and all the men in my age bracket then had been killed, and I mean I went to bed at night between eight or ten women and they didn't care if you changed and I didn't either. That's what made life so easy for me to stay in there. And I was a young man, exciting to me. I had never been around, I had always been around black women. I hadn't been around all kind of women, like four. I wasn't but 20 years old, 22. I was having so much fun and I got over there and time to go back home again, it was too good and I reenlisted and stayed as long as I could. By that time I had a kid.

Well sir, I don't want to take all your time today, but I really appreciate you letting me talk to you and record some of your memories, and what we'll do when I get back to my office, we'll make copies of this interview onto CDs for you and we'll mail those to you so you can have those to listen to. You can give them to your family or whomever you want.

Joe Vaughn: Oh yeah, well that's all right. Well I'll tell you whatever you wanted to know.

You've told us a lot and I appreciate just getting some of your memories of your time in the military, and our goal, we've got documents at the Land Office that go back several hundred years, and our hope is that these interviews will be part of those archives for hundreds of years as well so that maybe a hundred years or more from now someone will listen to this interview and learn a little bit about what the military was like when you were serving. So we really do appreciate it.

Joe Vaughn: I was in the Army when the Korea War started and finished. I was in the Army when Vietnam started, but it was going on when I retired. I've had my share of civilian and military and war life.

Well everybody at the General Land Office from Commissioner Patterson to every employee there appreciates your service for our country and thank you very much for that.

Joe Vaughn: Well I really don't regret retiring from the Army because I had some good times and of course some bad times, too, but I enjoyed my Army career. It wasn't something I did and didn't like. I enjoyed it.

It sounds like you did, yes sir.

Joe Vaughn: I didn't have to stay.

Yeah, to retire from it, that's great.

Joe Vaughn: Every three years you can get out or stay in. Of course at that time in Japan, all the men had been killed during World War II, and I was a young hot to trot young man and going to bed with three or four women, that was exciting to me, you know. Don't give me no three years, give me 20.

Yes sir, well thank you very much for letting me interview you.

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